PERO GAGLO DAGBOVIE

What is African American History?

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Introduction

What we now commonly call African American history – in previous times identified as *Negro* history, *Black* history, and *Afro-American* history – first achieved some sense of "legitimacy," and closely thereafter popularity, in the mainstream US historical profession sometime between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. Generally speaking, prior to the civil rights – Black Power movement, a diverse group of amateur and professionally trained African American historians defined what it meant to be historians of the black past. They produced various genres of black historical scholarship and actively participated in the early black history movement, a struggle to popularize, validate, and institutionalize the study of black life, history, and culture in the United States. Prior to *Brown* v. *Board of Education* (1954), a very small yet at times influential group of white historians likewise challenged normative renditions of US history by producing scholarship on African American history. In the decades since the early 1970s, the composition of the black historical profession has noticeably changed and scholarship in African American history has expanded by leaps and bounds, nurturing the development of numerous lively subspecialties. In each succeeding decade, most notably since the 1980s, historians have optimistically celebrated the field's advancement in scope, breadth, and recognition.

African American history is now unquestionably a thriving area of scholarly specialization in the US academy. It is no

longer uncommon to see publications on black historical subject matter on the *New York Times* bestseller list and among the ranks of award-winning books. Many historians of the black past, namely African American historians, have attained notoriety as leading scholars in national and international contexts. President Barack Obama has delivered emotional "National African American History Month" proclamations and the corresponding commemorative events and programs are recognizably a part of American popular culture. Furthermore, while claims that the United States became a "post-racial society" with the election of Obama as the 44th President of the United States in 2008 have been exaggerated and are problematic, to say the least, since 2011 a cluster of Hollywood historical dramas that depict – although at times superficially – episodes and icons from the black past have reaped massive profits at the box office, such as *The Help* (2012), *Django* (2012), *42: The Jackie Robinson Story* (2013), *The Butler* (2013), and British filmmaker Steve McQueen's multi-award-winning *12 Years a Slave* (2013), an adaptation of Solomon Northup's classic 1853 slave narrative.

Whether one considers Benjamin Lewis, William Cooper Nell, James W. C. Pennington, William Wells Brown, George Washington Williams, or W. E. B. Du Bois to be the "first" genuine black historian (this, of course, is contingent upon how one defines the term "historian"), the study of African American history is undeniably more than a century old. Change over time being a fundamental characteristic of all history, it should come as no surprise that the body of historical writings on African American history, the African American historical profession, and black history's meaning have transformed dramatically from the nineteenth century until the present. There is a wide assortment of historians and scholars active in the field. Scores of historians, scholars, intellectuals, and black social activists have conceived, defined, and conceptualized African American history in countless manners. There have been plenteous debates and controversies, interventions, innovations, and invigorating findings. What these thinkers, chroniclers, and interpreters have written about, how they have theorized their scholarly endeavors, and their approaches and methodologies have

inevitably been informed and shaped by the times in which they existed. The field will continue to evolve as succeeding generations cope with the times that await them, re-interpret the past, introduce and draw upon new methodologies and theoretical points of departure, benefit from future technological advancements, and discover what they consider to be "new" subject matters worthy of investigation.

Like all types of history, African American history is created by professional historians or those who act as historians. Armed with knowledge of the existing historiography on their topics of interest and by engaging with a range of different primary sources, historians attempt to piece together the past. Most people are only familiar with history through the eyes of those who have constructed it. Historiography – commonly and often simultaneously defined as the study of historians' scholarship, how history has been and is contrived, the history of historical writing, and the body of historical scholarship on historical subject matter – is, therefore, essential to understand when studying history.

This book focuses on African American history as a field of study and scholarly discipline, a profession or academic enterprise, and a meaningful ingredient of black culture and the enduring black freedom struggle. Examining and unpacking historians' ideas, scholarship, and actions are central to this book. This volume is predominantly about the ideas, perceptions, theories, and findings of historians of the black past and *African Americanists* (professional scholars whose expertise is in the study of African American life, history, and culture) who have produced significant published historical scholarship. Shortly after beginning this book, I abandoned attempting to write a truly comprehensive study. Therefore, I have had to make some conscious decisions about which historians, historiographical debates, and historical scholarship to include.

The fundamental purpose of this book is to offer an introduction to the field of African American history, past, present, and future. Designed to be used by undergraduate students who are unfamiliar with the broader contours of black history as a field, graduate students who seek clarification of the field's general history, growth, and scope, and those interested in the fundamental features of African American history,

historiography, and the profession, *What is African American History?* discusses some of the field's important subspecialties, evolution, turning points, defining characteristics, theories, debates, key texts and scholars, and imaginable future directions.

As my research concentrates on twentieth-century African American history, I focus much of my examination on scholarship on the black experience in the United States during the period that Giovanni Arrighi dubbed "the long twentieth century." At the same time, this book does call attention to some of the pressing issues in the historiography of the once highly contested subjects of slavery and Reconstruction. Though I do address historical scholarship on African Americans in global and diasporic contexts in several chapters, this is not a major focus of this book. I am primarily concerned with scholarship on African Americans residing in the United States. All of the scholarship analyzed in this study is written in English and published in the United States. Important scholarship has been produced on African American history abroad. For instance, building upon the research of Michel Jacques Fabre, co-founder of the Center for Afro-American Studies at the University of Paris, a noticeable group of French scholars and historians has produced significant scholarship on African American history and culture. Future scholarship on African American historiography would benefit from analyzing the study of black history abroad, especially in France, the UK, Japan, Australia, and Africa.

Non-specialists in African American history have certainly contributed to the field. This book, however, focuses on those with specific expertise in the field. Experts in African American history, African Americanists, generate scholarship and teach courses that focus on the lives, experiences, culture, and thoughts of African Americans from the past. The most obvious credential for a professional historian is the Ph.D. degree in history. While this book prioritizes the scholarly activities of professionally trained historians, I do acknowledge more than a few self-taught and non-Ph.D.-holding historians as well as professional scholars from other disciplines who have made important contributions to African American historiography and the black historical enterprise.

What is African American History? is organized chronologically as well as thematically. The first two chapters span from the late nineteenth century through the 1990s. Chapter 1 critiques the historiography of the black historical profession and explores the evolution of scholarship on African American history from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries until the 1960s and 1970s. I highlight the approaches and contributions of historians who most profoundly shaped the field's development, as well as the key turning points in the field. A major discussion of this chapter is African American history's movement from the margins into the mainstream of the US historical profession. Chapter 2 charts the evolution of key theoretical approaches, debates, and subspecialties in black history from the civil rights – Black Power movement through the 1990s. Because the study of African American history mushroomed, flourished, and became fragmented into numerous subspecialties during these decades, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to identify every area of significant African American historical inquiry. I highlight predominant trends and historiographical debates, focusing on the African American biographical genre; scholarship on slavery; black working-class, labor, and urban history; and the historiography on prominent long-twentieth-century black organizations.

The next two chapters are thematically oriented. Chapter 3 traces the growth and maturation of black women's history, one of the fastest-growing fields of African American history since the 1980s. I sub-divide African American women's history into several interconnected major phases from the 1970s until the present, and showcase the voices of black women historians, the field's chief practitioners. Chapter 4 examines how historians have contributed to, shaped, and sparked debates within the Black Studies enterprise from the late 1960s until the present. I also delve into the role of history as a core "basic subject area" of Black Studies and consider the relationship, including the similarities and differences, between Black Studies and African American history. Chapter 5 discusses the 21st-century black historical profession, identifies trends in African American historiography during the new millennium, and offers suggestions for future research in the field.

1

From the Margins to the Mainstream

In 1925, a mere decade after he began his unrelenting quest to institutionalize, legitimize, and popularize the then-marginalized study of African American history by founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH), Carter G. Woodson, "The Father of Black History," reflected: "whereas a decade ago only a few institutions gave the study of the record of the Negro any consideration, practically all reputable universities and colleges and even some high schools now feature the study of the Negro in that of racial relations or provide special courses in this neglected aspect of our life and history."[1] More than three decades later, historian John Hope Franklin, who by this time had established himself as a leading authority on black history with his *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (1947), echoed Woodson's optimistic sentiments in a state-of-the-field essay, "The New Negro History" (1957).

Though Franklin acknowledged the "far-reaching" and "deadly" impact of racist US historiography, he was very optimistic about the progress made by what he dubbed "the new Negro history." For Franklin, what he described as a sort of renaissance in African American history between the late 1930s and the late 1950s was "as significant and, in some ways, even more dramatic than the very events themselves that the writers have sought to describe."[2] He portrayed "the new Negro history" of the late 1950s in a manner that

suggests that he truly believed that the study of African American history had gained a somewhat secure footing in the mainstream (i.e., white-male-dominated) US historical profession and even in scholarly communities abroad. Franklin surmised that black history had "come into its own" and that "White and Negro historians, Northern and Southern historians, Japanese and Dutch historians have turned their attention to the study of the history of the Negro in the United States." He added: "Every major historical association in this country in the past ten years has given considerable attention to subjects related to Negro history at its annual meetings … For the first time in the history of the United States, there is a striking resemblance between what historians are writing and what has actually happened in the history of the American Negro."[3]

African American history's positioning *vis-à-vis* the mainstream US historical profession has changed in many significant ways since Woodson and Franklin imparted their aforementioned observations. Ultimately seeking to substantiate and publicize the profound influence that African Americans had on the development of American history, Woodson, Franklin, their predecessors, as well as their pre-Black-Power-era disciples were concerned and often preoccupied with integrating African American history into mainstream US history. A prevailing characteristic of the field for more than half of its existence, the movement to transport African American history from the margins into the mainstream of US historiography and the US historical profession was, in a sense, part of the broader black freedom struggle.

One of the most sudden, conspicuous, and thought-provoking defining moments in the evolution of the study of black history – from a marginalized subject of intellectual inquiry primarily embraced and produced by African American activists, writers, and professionally trained scholars to a field with noticeable mainstream scholarly curiosity – clearly materialized beginning in the late 1960s, coinciding with the early years of the turbulent Black Power movement, the black student movement, and the Black Studies movement. This almost spur-of-the-moment mainstream awareness and symbolic sanctioning of African American history during the late 1960s is undeniable, yet it is a more complex

phenomenon than historians have acknowledged. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, more than a few historians, including prominent white male US historians like C. Vann Woodward and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., reiterated Woodson's and Franklin's encouraging sentiments about an increased mainstream interest in African American history. During the 1980s and 1990s, leading African Americanists periodically continued to draw attention to African American history's more anchored presence in the mainstream US historical profession. "Today Afro-American history is a respected and legitimate field of American history,"[4] remarked Darlene Clark Hine in 1986. A decade later, Thomas C. Holt surmised that the "black experience has ceased to be a peripheral topic in American history; it is now among the central phenomena of the national experience."[5]

Nearly a decade and a half into the twenty-first century, historians of black America are no longer preoccupied with demonstrating or proclaiming the mainstream status or legitimacy of the study of African American history. African American history is now certainly an established and flourishing field of scholarly endeavor with its own frequently invoked traditions, productive institutions, distinctive theoretical constructs and methods, lively subspecialties, vast historiography, and recognizable niche in the mainstream US historical profession.

Like US history in general and its numerous subfields, African American history as a distinct field of historical inquiry has undergone a host of transformations over the last century. It is important to understand how what was most often called *Negro history* until the late 1960s, and what we now interchangeably call *African American history* and *black history*, became the dynamic and familiar field that it is today. Since the late nineteenth century, historians have appraised the evolution of the US historical profession and American historiography. At the same time, very few historians have explored the intriguing development of African American history as a distinct scholarly field.

From the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century, most authors of widely read monographs on American historiography and the US historical profession largely ignored African American history or minimized the

contributions of the field's most innovative scholars. In the late 1950s, one historian of the black past was correct in concluding that "the literature on American historiography has had almost nothing to say about Negroes."[6] In his classic *History: Professional Scholarship in America*, first published in 1965 and periodically reprinted and updated until 1990, John Higham neglected to mention the contributions of African American historians and African American history as a field. The third edition of Ernst Breisach's *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (2007) was advertised as containing a "compelling" section on African American history. Yet he grossly misinterprets the field by stating in passing: "Carl Degler began the integration of Afro-American history into mainstream American history."[7] Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988) and Ellen Fitzpatrick's *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880–1980* (2002) are the first major monographs on the American historical profession to discuss African American history in substantive ways.[8]

Earl E. Thorpe produced the first major study of the black historical craft, *Negro Historians in the United States* (1958), later revised and updated as *Black Historians: A Critique* (1971). He focused solely on the historical writings of "any American of color who wrote history" from the early nineteenth century until the late 1950s. A prevailing argument of Thorpe's is that the black historians featured in his book remained largely committed to Carter G. Woodson's corrective and black pride-instilling brand of historical writing, in turn employing "black history *as a weapon in the fight for racial equality*."[9] Though he defined black history in a reflectful manner, demarcated salient distinctions between the various generations of black historians, and offered insightful suggestions for the future cultivation of the field, Thorpe's work is more of a collection of intellectual biographies on amateur and professionally-trained black historians than it is a comprehensive assessment of the growth and evolution of African American history as a field or profession.

In 1986, two important works focusing on the study of African American history were published: *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future* edited by

Darlene Clark Hine, and August Meier and Elliott Rudwick's *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980*. The first studies of their kind, these works complicated and revised previous representations of the US historical profession and historiography by offering expansive historical overviews of African American history as a field of study.[10] *The State of Afro-American History* brought together a collection of papers that were delivered at an American Historical Association-sponsored conference on black history in October 1983 at Purdue University. The participants agreed that "the time has come to assess and evaluate the historical outpourings of the last several decades" and to overview areas of future research and dissemination.[11] In a brief essay in this volume, "On the Evolution of Afro-American History," John Hope Franklin identified four generations of scholarship in black history from 1882 until the mid-1980s signaled by different publications and events. In *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980* (1986), still one of the most comprehensive overviews of the African American historical enterprise, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick provide a detailed periodization of the field, sub-dividing African American historiography into five phases from approximately 1915 until 1980 and probing into innumerable historians' contributions. While Franklin's concise essay overviews broad contours of the field's maturation over a century and complicates conventional interpretations of its hasty integration into institutions of higher education, it does not delve into the nuances of the field's evolution. On the other hand, Meier and Rudwick's study is extensive, but they were fixated upon explaining what motivated white historians to produce scholarship on black history.

Historians have ascribed the beginnings of the field of African American history to many different individuals from the early years of the republic until the first several decades of the twentieth century. How one determines the genesis of African American history, or any other field of historical study, is of course contingent upon how one decides to identify the starting points of intellectual historical thought and define the criteria for what constitutes significant historical production. In *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*